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THE LAST OF THE GREAT POETS

England is rich in accomplished writers of verse: Thomas Hardy, Dobson, Watson, and Kipling; or, of highest promise in a younger school, Phillips and Noyes, but none equals in power, or in volume, or in the splendor of his general achievement, the late Algernon Charles Swinburne, who sleeps to-day in the little yard of St. Boniface, Bonchurch, Isle of Wight. This one may have a sweet note, and that other the authentic touch of passion, but it was in Swinburne alone that all the qualities of poetic greatness were combined. None of his contemporaries, yet living, pursues the poetic calling with so sincere and brilliant an allegiance to the claims of absolute and unadulterated poetry. Swinburne's was a solitary preëminence unparalleled in modern letters.

It is in this regard that one thinks of him as last of the great poets of that great era which we call Victorian, when poets heads reached higher above the crowd than any now. Of them he surely was in his splendid work, while, obviously and literally, was he with them in point of time. When he was born, in London, on the fifth of April, 1837, Southey had yet six years to live, Wordsworth a baker's dozen, Moore two more than Wordsworth, and Walter Savage Landor over a quarter of a century. William Morris was three in that accession year; Christine Rossetti was seven, and her more famous brother, Dante Gabriel, nine. Tennyson was then midway through that fallow time which lay between the poems of 1830 and those of '42, and less than a month after Swinburne's appearance in the world Browning's *Stratford* was put on the stage by Macready at Covent Garden. When Swinburne, then living with the brothers Rossetti at Queen's House, Chelsea, was publishing (1860) his initial dramas of *The Queen Mother* and *Rosamund*, Mrs. Browning and Arthur Hugh Clough were yet living and writing, though each was to lay by the pen in less than a twelve-month. The *Atalanta in Calydon* appeared in types only a year later than Browning's *Dramatis Personæ*. When the *Poems and Ballads* appeared in 1866, leading not only to the author's "discovery" but to his de-

nunciation as well, Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis* had not yet been published, nor had Morris's *Earthly Paradise* yet come to charm with its golden haze of the long-ago recalled, and the "stained-glass poetry" of Rossetti was still four years away.

With peculiar truth, then, was Swinburne to be considered as a last link with a passing period of English literature; William Rossetti, brother to Dante, still lives, to be sure, and Hall Caine, who has just been telling of his youthful associations with greater men; but none of these was so essentially a part of that era of yesterday; none so truly the equal of that era's leaders of British letters, as was this just-passed singer. The man's whole-hearted worship of material beauty, which once led De Maupassant to say of him that he was "the most extravagantly artistic temperament of our time," allied him closely with those Pre-Raphaelites with whom for years he lived and worked; and writes him down lineally descended from John Keats himself.

Again, like a notable few of his mighty forebears, Swinburne "looked the part" of poet—as had Scott and Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley and Keats, or, in his own day, Tennyson and Browning. The high forehead, the deep-set, violet-blue eyes, at once "intense" and intellectual, the "wheaten" beard, the refined, slight figure, all contributed to give him the air of one set apart; only the furrowed face and the bald head betokened in the closing years that he had turned three score and ten. Born of an admiral father and a mother sprung from the long line of Ashburnham's Earls, to his finger tips he looked the aristocrat he was—an aristocrat with socialistic tendencies strongly marked, a born "member of the opposition;" an aristocratic Bohemian, a downright Pagan. His was the *cachet* due his family and easy means, Eton and Oxford; with travel on the Continent for a time after school days, with Rossetti and Burn-Jones met at Balliol, and then Europe again (not "stopping" long enough at the ancient university on the Isis to get his degree), with some months spent with Landor in his retirement at Fiesol—"the youngest English poet visiting the oldest" and frankly worshipping at his shrine. It is interesting to recall in connection with the Oxford days that he, with James Bryce, now British Ambassador at Washington; the

late Birbeck Hill, to-day famous as a Johnsonian; and the essayist Pater; formed one of the many little "mutual improvement societies" which, in the mid-century, flourished in the English universities. Mr. Bryce has just been telling how that particular little group first heard the verse of Browning read aloud by Algernon Swinburne.

It is amusing to us of to-day, hardened as we are to a worse-than-Jacobean fiction by certain recent outrages in book form, to read of the storm of criticism which greeted the *Poems and Ballads* of 1866; the first two cantos of the *Childe Harold* had made no greater stir than this slim volume. Luxuriance of phrase, passion, honest sensuousness in the praise of physical beauty, these were traits to be found from cover to cover, in such verses as —

O lips that mine have grown into
Like April's kissing May.
O fervent eyelids letting through
Those eyes the greenest of things blue
The bluest of things grey.

If you were I and I were you
How could I love you, say?
How could the rose-leaf love the rue,
The day love nightfall and her dew,
Though night may love the day?

But such true criticisms were wholly inadequate to the result, for all moral England sat up and howled. One Pharisee who had bought an Academy picture which happened to include a cat which Swinburne was said to have much admired, promptly had the animal painted out of the canvas. It is said that Tennyson compelled Moxon, who had issued the green-clad first edition of the book, to withdraw it, threatening otherwise to change his publisher, which sounds apocryphal, though it is certain that the second edition bore the imprint of Camden Hotten. Even Rossetti sprang his famous jest: "There is no doubt as to *poeta nascitur* in Swinburne's case, but unfortunately he is *non fit* for publication." Now it all seems hollow enough. We have forgiven the fiery lyrics of the "fleshy school" of love; have forgotten his rhymed libations to those

arrayed against thrones and priestcraft, his rhapsodies on nihilism — such as barred him from the laeurate's bays and sack of good canary when Tennyson died in 1892. He stands to-day a poet of the first rank, an incomparable master of technique, a triumphant leader against the tyranny of conventional forms, the "Wagner of poetic music." His place is sure, and it is a great place. As Professor Woodberry has written:

"Liberty, melody, passion, faith, nature, love, and fame, are the seven chords which the poet's hand, from the first touch upon the lyre, has swept now for two score years with music that has blown through the world."

Amid the outcries of that generation-old attack were heard the voices of two American critics, valuing the true poetic worth which lay behind the youthful expressions: Richard Grant White and Edmund Clarence Stedman. A year earlier the latter had greeted the *Atalanta in Calydon* as "the auroral light of a new star rising above the horizon," setting the poem, all in all, by the side of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and claiming for it real superiority in melody. It was Stedman who pointed out that the opening invocation to the moon, beginning "Maiden and mistress of the months and stars," is as fine as anything in English dramatic verse and that the lyrical chorus commencing "When the hounds of Spring are on Winter's traces" is as perfect in metrical invention as anything all literature has to show. The *Atalanta*, though it made no least "hit" the year of its appearing, still stands the foremost item in its author's poetic aggregate; a tragedy on the severest lines of the old Greek model, built round the characteristically Grecian theme of fatalism, reproducing the antique absolutely, with choral lyrics unsurpassed in any language:

The ivy falls with the Bacchanal's hair
 Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;
 The wild vine slipping down leaves bare
 Her bright breast shortening into sighs;
 The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,
 But the berried ivy catches and cleaves
 To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare
 The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies.

Small wonder that Alfred Tennyson, who had received a copy of the drama from the young man who had visited him at Farringford, half a dozen years earlier, should have written to congratulate him on its "strength and splendor," and to describe it as one of the finest pieces of work he had read for years.

The one note lacking in the splendid gamut sounded by the *Atalanta*—the note of human feeling, of "the universal heart,"—was struck in the *Chastelard*, which appeared in that same year of 1865. Swinburne's three poetic dramas encircling the tragic history of the Queen of Scots—*Chastelard* (1865), *Bothwell* (1874) and *Marie Stuart* (1881); a labor of true love extended over sixteen years—show real dramatic worth and high scholarship (as was only to have been expected, however, since "A. C. S." wrote the *Brittanica* article on "the royal lady more sinned against than sinning"), but they are especially strong in delineation of character, essentially warm in their feeling appreciation of human nature. Time was when the poet's detractors had no word for the *Bothwell*, for instance, but to call it merely the longest thing in English dramatic verse, but such criticism is not of to-day, when Stedman has placed the trilogy in the forefront of English dramatic verse, while William Morton Payne goes yet farther in ranking it as the finest contribution to dramatic poetry since Elizabethan times, *The Cenci* only being excepted. More and more is Swinburne's immense skill, if not actual genius, in such verse now appreciated; the *Erichtheus* is as purely Greek as the *Samson Agonistes*, the *Marino Faliero* surpasses Byron's play on the same subject at every point, and if the *Lochrine* falls below this level, yet is it recognized as one of the most remarkable pieces of verse-weaving in all English. Even at the close the master's cunning was not lost, as appeared only the other day when, at seventy-one, he gave the world his *Duke of Gandia*, a Borgia story of the empurpled Cæsar and the now almost perennial Lucretia. Its four brief acts formed only a small mercy, but it bore the authentic stamp of all the man's old command of his craft; no poet was more competent than he to portray such a welter of

elemental passions. As a brief instance of what could flow from the pen of this septuagenarian, take these few stately lines wherein the noble assassin preaches that sublime Paganism which the Pope of the day had practiced:

I and thou,
 One, will set hand as never God hath set
 To the Empire and this steerage of the world.
 Do thou forget but him who is dead, and was
 Naught, and bethink thee what a world to wield
 The Eternal God hath given into thine hands,
 Which daily mould him out of bread, and give
 His kneaded flesh to feed on. Thou and I
 Will make this rent and ruinous Italy
 One. Ours it shall be, body and soul, and great,
 Above all power and glory given to God,
 To them that died to set thee where thou art—
 Throned on the dust of Cæsar and of Christ,
 Imperial. Earth shall quail again, and rise
 Again the higher because she trembled. Rome
 So bade it be; it was, and shall be.

There is here no least hint of senility. To his final illness Swinburne was wholly alive, walking far and fast, swimming much and well, loving Dickens warmly. "I think he is the happiest creature under Heaven," wrote Harold Begbie of him not long ago. "He is a boy, the eternal child, nothing can make him *blasé*, or dull the edge of his appetite of pure enjoyment. He lives every second of his life, fully, resolutely, merrily, blithely." Practically every morning up to his seventy-second birthday, the poet would start out from "The Pines" at Putney, just to the west of great, grey London, where for years he had dwelt with Theodore Watts-Dunton, the critic, and tramp across Wimbledon Common to a certain wayside inn, where he would drink leisurely a large bass and talk brilliantly of the events of the local day with the foregathered representatives of the countryside. At such moments he was democracy personified, but let the newspaper reporter rise above his horizon and the unget-at-able aristocrat at once appeared. One interviewer, who had waylaid him on the Common and had walked some distance beside him, plying him with unanswered questions, suddenly heard "Young man, I see

by your lips you're talking to me, but you're quite wasting your time; I am stone deaf."

Swinburne's long life was a full one. Thirty-nine titles stand to his credit, including those glorious *Songs of Italy* and *Before Sunrise* in both of which he sounded so strongly his note of praise for Italy's struggle for liberty; and those wholly charming poetic narratives of *Tristram of Lyonesse*, and *The Tale of Balen*. Not one of these, however, nor the *Sienna*, nor *A Channel Passage*, nor the *Songs of Two Nations*, nor the poetic trifling of *A Modern Heptalogia*, sways a reader as will so readily the verse which came from Byron or Wordsworth or Tennyson. The reason for this cannot be that the man was self-withdrawn from his fellows, for so were the two laureates just named. One reason may be that Swinburne's poetry contains few lines distinguished by their concentration of phrase; no poet is more difficult to quote. The expensive formats, too, in which his work was issued, unquestionably militated against his wide acceptance. But a third reason has been given which seems most apt to be the true one; his subject matter is too intellectual, he too seldom strikes the note of genuine sympathies. These sentences of H. V. Sutherland, appearing in his introduction to an edition of some of Swinburne's shorter poems, put out in this country in 1900, seem to sum up the matter:

"Swinburne is by no means an idol in England. This inability to charm the great reading public is not difficult of comprehension. To begin with, he has not the excessive Britishness, the extreme love of his own country, the absolute belief in its present and its future, all coupled with an inherent and unswerving reliance in an established church that nurtured the well regulated muse of Tennyson. He is not conspicuous by any such unquestioning faith in God and impregnable assurance of the progress of the human race, or by any wonderful sympathy with men and women, with their joys and with their sorrows, such as draws thousands to Robert Browning in spite of his often labored utterance."

If Swinburne seldom strikes the chords of domestic affections, if he seldom speaks to humanity in its everyday moods, yet has he nobly contributed to that verse literature which

hymns human liberties, and to that even greater literature whose text is youth. As to his "marines," Byron himself, in his glorious paeans to the might and majesty of old ocean, has been surpassed in kind by Swinburne — by his *A Forsaken Garden* and that whole group called *By the North Sea*. Writing but the other day of this side of the poet's make-up, a Canadian friend of his says:

"He knew and loved the sea in many ways; as a lusty swimmer, triumphantly conscious of delight in another element more intimate and wonderful than earth or air; as an old dog of a sea captain who all his days has chanced its tempests, and to whom withal it has been tender; as a worshipper of the fair Aphrodite, who was 'the deep seas' daughter;' as a painter casting aside his palette in despair of its elusive hues; as a mystic, to whom its waves typify the 'from everlasting to everlasting' of the human soul; as a patriot, to whom the sea signifies the imperial greatness of his country; as a disciple of Liberty, to whom the unconquered and unconquerable ocean is the type and emblem of freedom. In all these ways — and in others too subtly intimate for our apprehension — did Swinburne know and love the sea, and of this knowledge was begot his incomparable verses in praise of 'That Old Mother.'"

For such true gifts to poetry as are these,— gifts to our thought of youth, our aspirations for liberty, our mind-pictures of the mighty sea — Swinburne will be long remembered, but his clearest title to literary immortality will lie in the variety and finish of his rhythms, in his melody, in his linguistic mastery. He it was who released the heroic couplet from the dead hand of Pope, and made of it again the winged creature it was meant to be. He added new harmonies to the technique of blank verse, and developed the devices of repetition and alliteration into a splendid system of orchestration. His vocabulary is almost inexhaustible, his range of form is practically limitless, his store of poetic figures seems measureless. Turn again, for proof, to the *Ave atque Vale*, wherein there sounds an elegiac note not far below that of *Thyrsis* and *Adonais*, or take those few, much-quoted lines, which will be found in all the anthologies a century hence:

And the high gods took in hand
Fire, and the falling of tears,

And a measure of sliding sand
From under the feet of the years ;
And froth and drift of the sea ;
And dust of the labouring earth ;
And bodies of things to be
In the houses of death and birth ;
And wrought with weeping and laughter,
And fashioned with loathing and love,
With life before and after
And death beneath and above,
For a day and a night and a morrow,
That his strength might endure for a span
With travail and heavy sorrow,
The holy spirit of man.

Shelley (between whom and Swinburne an interestingly close parallel might readily be drawn) of all British poets stood most closely to such work as this, yet not even Shelley fully equalled in such regard the achievement of the later writer. When Tennyson said of Swinburne, "He is a reed through which all things blow into music" he said the one truest thing of this unlaureled laureate—compressed to a single clinging phrase the fact which has written the name of Swinburne large and high upon the glowing page of nineteenth century letters.

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